

Interview with Odell H. Sylvester Jr. Part 1

Rick Moss: [00:00:00] You ready to go?

Odell H. Sylvester: Yes.

Rick Moss: Thank you. We are speaking this afternoon and they went to Mr. O'Dell Sylvester. Thank you, Mr. Sylvester, for taking time out of your day to participate in this project. We really appreciate it. And I know that you were not born and raised in Oakland, but I also know that you've been in Oakland for quite a long time, right? You mentioned that you've been here since 1946. What brought you to Oakland in 1946?

Odell H. Sylvester: Well, to attend the university of California, cause I had just been discharged from the military world war II in December of 1945. And I had been a student prior to that at Lincoln university, Missouri, which is in Jefferson city and was the black college for the state of Missouri.

So [00:01:00] after being in the military I had met people, told me about the university of California, Berkeley, and I decided when I went back and I found that all of the courses that I really needed to graduate were not available. I worked at the post office a while, and then I came, decided to come to the University of California, Berkeley.

Rick Moss: So, that must have been, really, a big difference between Lincoln University, which has a long story history, and then UC Berkeley and --

Odell H. Sylvester: Quite different.

Rick Moss: What was the major difference in terms of your experience?

Odell H. Sylvester: Now we're talking about Lincoln University in Missouri, not PA

Rick Moss: That's right.

Odell H. Sylvester: Well, first of all, it's a. It's quite a different format for teaching Lincoln University is a relatively small school.

Total enrollment of about [00:02:00] 600, I'd estimate. And I wouldn't have known about Cal Berkeley except for the three years I spent in the military in Africa and Italy and places where I was exposed to other people who were from the west coast. Most of the people in the unit I was in were far east from New York and New Jersey and places like that.

And a lot of them. Regular army people reserve us, and there was not a significant interest in going to college. They were musicians and street people who were really very nice guys, but education was something that was not something that had priority in there. And when they got out of the military and they were a lot older than I was, I went in the military at 18.

I was discharged at 21 after those three years.

So.

Rick Moss: But the people you were exposed to from the west coast told you about UC Berkeley. Did they tell you [00:03:00] about California at all?

Odell H. Sylvester: No. There were other people because I went in the military in a group of people from you, from University from Lincoln 42 of us in enlisted reserve Corps that the military had promised you could stay until you graduated. Well, I was a sophomore then. And three months later when I became 18, they forgot what they had promised. And they said, you will go in the military. And all we completed was 12 weeks of, of training. And then we were off to North Africa and there were 42 of us. So there were a lot of people that had gone to school with. It was one of the things that influenced me to get

in the situation I was in, because I knew all these guys. Who were athletes and I was on, I was a football player and a track person, and these guys were guys I've known [00:04:00] for. So I was influenced to join them. I dunno how to, what kind of reasoning that I did that, but I thought I would be initially I thought I would be able to graduate for at 20, from Lincoln University of Missouri. And when that didn't happen, I decided that I would have to make the best of what the circumstances I was in. So being exposed to other people and a lot of people from the 99th pursuit squad in the military and in World War II was still very segregated. And we were attached to the army air force service command, and that command put us in charge of the hotels in Rome. So the last assignment was for 18 months was enrollment lately, and we handled the hotels, which were used for recreation for army air air force officers, and [00:05:00] hotels segregated into field grade for colonels and generals in and two company grade for captains and below.

So actually at first started about going to Wharton school of finance, but I knew nothing about either school wasn't school of fine, and that's in Pennsylvania or a university of California, Berkeley, but as it turned out, I was influenced to come to Berkeley. And when I got here, the weather was so great.

I decided I'd never go back to Missouri and I wondered why anybody else lived there.

Rick Moss: All right. How did you find what was your first impressions of UC Berkeley and,

Odell H. Sylvester: Well, my first impression was as if it was a an assembly line where people came [00:06:00] through and ate. Much of an effort to help you out. You either made it or you didn't. There were only two examination, which I was and to do.

You didn't know the instructors and they didn't they, they may have cared about you, but they didn't know you. And when you, I was in classes that were 250 in the class, and the instructor professor came in and gave his lecture. And that

was very, very strange to me cause I didn't, I felt good. I think they ever knew me and I only knew them by sight.

It wasn't a personal kind of a management or relationship, but I quickly learned that while they didn't take role. They did give exams and there was generally two exams and you had to pass the midterm and the final. And so that was quite a new experience for me because I've been in small classes where you went in and talked to the instructor and they kind of helped you out and new words we wanted to achieve and where you [00:07:00] want it to go.

And there was a significant advantage. But I had to grow up quickly at the university of California and also found that there was some situations regarding a university that I had no idea about. Blacks didn't stay on campus. There were probably about an estimating about 30 of us in a population of about 25 or 30,000.

And we got to know each other because most of us lived in south Berkeley. And you lived in south Berkeley as a result of making arrangements with people who lived there to get a room or to work something out so that you could pay them for your accommodations. But at the same time, you became great friends.

With the other black people who were at the university of California. And at that time there were significant number of people who later on became political, [00:08:00] accomplishees and that sort of thing, and people in the field of the law. And I don't want, I don't know whether I should mention names in a well.

Why they manual Clinton, white and bill Sweeney and bill and Byron Rumford. All those guys, Byron was only one who had a car. And so we were going to go home. We waited until he. It was ready to go. And that was late in evenings, you know? I think he was in graduate school by then, but we all were as many as good got in the car.

It was wise, we walked, but the became great friends because we were able to discuss the kind of problems we had. And, and

in some instances where many of us were from other parts of the country Clint wife's from Sacramento, but bill Sweeney was from down south someplace. And a lot of guys, a lot of us were like that.

So we were able to help each other [00:09:00] and making us feel like we needed to work hard if we seem like we were not going to make it. So I don't remember. I don't think of anyone that in our group that really fail. They mostly all graduated because we held each other's hands in the sense.

Rick Moss: What were some of your early impressions of the African-American community in Oakland?

Odell H. Sylvester: Yeah, well I was not, I guess demonstrably concerned because I lived in Kansas city and Kansas city is a segregated town also, and most of the black people here lived in south Berkeley, or maybe. West Berkeley, but they mostly lived together and I was accustomed to that. And then I was not challenged by and I managed to get the place live, where [00:10:00] there was a lady there who had Bernie's rooms.

I met his room, Southern Cal Berkeley people. So I feel uncomfortable about that. And it probably was allowed me a time to become adjusted to the kind of atmosphere that there was at Cal Berkeley, because it was quite different from a segregated small school in Missouri, where I had was a total total of my college experience.

Rick Moss: Did you ever live in Oakland?

Odell H. Sylvester: Not before that. I lived in, after I graduated and I'd already decided after a few days in Berkeley that I was not going back to Missouri, not to live. So anyway when I started to look for a job after I graduated in September of 1948 [00:11:00] It dawned upon me, even though there's a bill of occupations at the University of California, and I had studied with a lot of, of other students who in business business administration, where I was, but they were all there were no, I think I was the only black and not only in the study group, but in most of the classes that I had, but they were able

to get jobs. In junior executive programs and I was not able to do that, but because I had been in the military police in the army and for that three years, I thought at least that was an opportunity for me to make a living while worked hard, to get, to go to some other, kind of a job, because I did not want to be a policeman as a career.

And I think that was a pretty much the kind of attitude that existed [00:12:00] among Blacks at that time, African Americans, because you rarely went to college to become a policeman, but that became a reality when I got here because I couldn't get a job otherwise. And I did finally get a job with golden state mutual insurance company.

And I worked as. Collector on the debit, but it was industrial insurance. And some of the people who had the insurance policies were very, very marginal. In terms of income, mostly ladies, women with several children and while they were impressed with the idea, they should have some kind of insurance for their children frequently they could not maintain it. The premiums that they had to pay had to pay. And also in that situation, when I was unable to get [00:13:00] there, when they got paid on the end of the week, they would have spent the money for other necessities and it was very clear and it didn't have any residual value to the policies.

But that was the first job I could, that I, the only job I could get at the time that would give me a guarantee. And I was fairly successful at it because, people were nice. And you knew when you get there, you have to get there when they had the money or they wouldn't have it. And so I've made.

I thought \$400 a month was a really, really big salary at that point after graduating. So they guaranteed me two, this may be too much detail. I don't know. It's up to you. Okay. Well, I was guaranteed \$225 a month. And you had to make delivered [00:14:00] policies that would meet that. And then over that I was making about \$400 a month fairly.

So, except that I had determined that I didn't want to be a policeman. That was not what I aspired to be. So I wanted to be a probation officer and it turns out that the I'm trying to

think of a nice word for the, it wasn't over it, but they had, they letting me know there was one black police probation officer and they didn't have room for another one at that point in time.

There's about 400 police probation officers. So, but anyway, I had been married. I was married then and my wife was also, he graduated a year before. So she worked for the county and between letting me know that they didn't have civic members of the same family for the county. And the [00:15:00] gatekeepers letting me know that I would be better off for a job someplace else.

So I then decided I would try to take the exam for a police officer and. I figured that having a degree, at least I'd be able to pass it with a true false exam. So I did pass it and I got a job and the job paid 315 dollars.

Rick Moss: So that's less than what you were making at --

Odell H. Sylvester: Yes, but yeah, but I was working 80 hours a week at golden state mutual because you had to work at night and you had to meet work on the weekends and you had to go and people had money and the people were at the lower level of the economic ladder and they frequently didn't have much money. And they worked very hard and made me feel that that was not the job I wanted to stay in.

And on the other hand, golden

state mutual life [00:16:00] insurance company, one of the. Insurance policy companies in,

in California, but I think it was the base was Houston, Los Angeles. There was a place, you know, more about the nineties, but I know that

they were active in the bay area. And you're the first person that I've

talked to, who actually worked.

I did work for them. And there were a lot of other guys that they were, what did we call those guys? There's a name for the people that we had debts. And you were an insurance agent and you did after pass the the state exam to be an insurance agent. And I did that with no problem, but I worked there, there from I guess when I graduated maybe October.

Until April of the next year. And by that time I'd [00:17:00] taken the example, the Oakland police department. And I don't know why it just happened, but on April fool's day, the 1st of April, 1949, I became a police much against my adjustment. And there were six put old black policemen at that point in time. And the black police officers.

Downtown. They had a bat. They, we met behind the first fire station eight and Campbell. And that was the only, and you, we met there and we actually, there must be some nice way to say that we were in a part of the department, but there were six officers there. The first two officers hired was. I dunno what that's to give their names or not, but they're they're th they also want, the first one was a janitor at city hall and the [00:18:00] next one was a dining car waiter.

They were the first two officers who were given temporary jobs and the Oakland police department. So between them and for others, Who had passed the exam and they want, and I became the six officer, but the only one with the, with a college education. Hmm. So what was your beat like? I mean, what did you do?

We all, we worked on seventh street, all of us from seven in the evening to three in the morning. And those hours related to the times the bars were open the bars close at two, and your job was mostly trying to help the bartenders and the bar owners get people who were a little too intoxicated to go home, get convinced them.

And in addition to that there were no radios available. They didn't have [00:19:00] radios except in the cars. And none of us, not the black police officers had where it had been motor at cars as a assigned. I just had a walk in at a walking beak from seven in the evening, till three in the morning. And that it

was only foreseeable the assignment that we asked because you didn't work in other areas of the site.

But, and not only that, but without radios, without any means of communication, all you had to do was there were boxes about every four blocks apart and those police boxes had lights on them and the lights, what glow would turn red when they needed, when somebody in that area, one of the black police officer.

Needed some assistance. So you'd have to get to that box and find out what the problem was and where it was located and then get there to give this other policemen. So I Han, so [00:20:00] it was not the best of circumstances, but that was the way it was in those days. And it didn't change right away on the other

hand being on being that close.

To that, to the action all the time. Must've given you a pretty good perspective on, you know, what was happening in that area and really get

to see it from doubt about it. And as a matter of fact it was that was west Oakland and that was the Oakland of black people. And cause. Bar owners. And the other people that are in business had all their businesses down there.

You got to know them. And they were people who were struggling most of them from the south, but they were people who had business ma minds and they made things work. [00:21:00] Some of the places that were there, it was slim Jenkins. It was a seventh in war. There was a place craft club. Yeah. Some of the other places where musicians played it was also the place where soldiers.

Came to hang out and then it was soldiers, young people who were from like the army base or someplace like that. But psychologically they, Jimmy were not prepared to deal with black police officers.

Rick Moss: I was going to ask if they had the level of respect for you.

Odell H. Sylvester: Not for Blacks. They didn't because most of them were from the south.

And they had maybe have had serious mistreatment problems with other police officers. And most of the police officers, they had to deal with we're black, we're white weather. And consequently, it was a matter of dealing with those people in such a [00:22:00] way that they. Well, not in that they didn't feel you were trying to intimidate them or being overwhelmingly disrespectful, that sort of thing.

But fortunately the reality was that the two guys who were down there in the beginning, They had a very difficult time because attitude was more prevalent, particularly among soldiers who felt like they went in the military and many of them were physically fit and they weren't going to let anything.

And mostly they were guilty of being drunk. That's about all, but they wanted to challenge anybody. So they felt they were not going to let a policemen one lone policeman in most cases, put them in jail. So the two guys who worked down there actually turned out to be make it easier for us. Those guys were very, very in a nice word combative.

And when they had a problem, they always [00:23:00] won.

So anyway, what happened was that after a while, When you got the other police officers down there, then there were other people in the community, the soldiers and the police, the people did not respect police. We're not the only ones that there were other people. Who were doing the best they could. They were from middle-class areas in the south, and they felt proud of the fact that you were there and they will cooperate with you.

But you had to extend yourself to let them know that you weren't a carbon copy of the experiences that they had had with police officers all over the south. And consequently, it

took a while for that to develop. But, and then there were no. Black officers in any rank, not, not Sergeant Lieutenant captains or anything, and certainly not in the upper ranks.

And a lot of times the police [00:24:00] officers who were there had segregated attitudes, they were from the south too, in many instances, not all but many instances. And their attitude was they had about three cars in the city, mostly operated by a traffic officers. And when they. Called by the operator at city hall to come in, to assist a policeman in our area.

They knew we were walking police officers frequently because of the fact they came in the car, they took an attitude that they were your superiors. Well, we had a problem with that and very quickly we identified themselves. To themselves, your police, your patrol, you're not a Sergeant. You don't have any rank.

You get to save money. We do, you may have been a policeman longer, but so that was a conflict, but it worked out [00:25:00] because most of the guys who were successful as policemen, I'm trying to say they want combative, but that's not totally true. They didn't accept. Any kind of rejection by another guy who had the same rank as they had.

And that was among those two. They did. When, when did you realize or come to terms with the fact that you were a policeman and actually liked it or accepted it as your

career? Well, that was a little bit longer, lo lot longer because when I, when I went down there, one of the guys who was a policeman.

We went down to the headquarters at city hall and they gave me a badge and told me I was going to work that night. I had not been to any kind of school or anything. But I put the badge on my suit and didn't have uniform either, [00:26:00] but I don't think that they were very, very, very concerned about it because I've really think.

That the, the city administration decided that it was made most sense to put black officers down in this highly segregated west Oakland, where they were going to be subject to charges of destruction donation and all that sort of thing. And some of them were choose, some of them were, but the reality was that they felt, I'm sure that.

This situation could be better handled by Blacks. And so I was the sixth one, and some of the other guys were very good. And those, because a lot of the officers who had originally been appointed, they had they're I'm trying to see the education was limited in a nice way. [00:27:00] But the reality was that most of the rest were made for drunk and fighting. And that was section three 14 of the penal code to say, that's the only part of the city we did. Most of the guys didn't make a restaurant. Anything else? W well,

Rick Moss: There was a general level of crime, not there is that one of the reasons why

Odell H. Sylvester: The crimes were crimes that happened in poor neighbor, they were institution.

There was gangs. There was people robbed each other and people fought. Those are the kinds of criminal, criminal activities, you know what? They were people problems. And we've had the bank properties in there so they didn't have any bags and a half the time. Somebody who was in in an altercation with somebody else, they were their friends.

And you also made a Jad to make a judgment. Well, if I put [00:28:00] this guy in jail, he's going to be in jail over the weekend and he won't have a job Monday and his family needs it. Cause he's the only source of income for that family. And consequently, you have to make some judgements. What really needed to be done and how we could best service the people that were there and needed service on top of that was the intermingled with that area of west Oakland where Latinos, who were mostly immigrants who were mostly just here and working at the lowest level.

Yeah. Most of the time they, they talk about immigration and not having papers, nobody paid for it, but it turns out that if you, and sometimes the language barrier made it impossible, they got in a fight with each other. And when a police officer came, they went to fight [00:29:00] with the policeman because nobody, there was very difficult to understand what was being going on.

But after awhile, they, the guy. The police officer whose place I took, had been in a situation that involved some Mexicans, primarily Mexicans, there were Latinos, but mostly Mexicans. And he had been overwhelmed by a group of Mexicans. Several times in Eastern, long time in the hospital. I think that may have been one of the reasons why they sent me down there right away.

I didn't know all this. When I had no idea, this was a kind of background, it was available. But in any rate there were a lot of Latinos down there. And well, I can say Mexicans a really, they were very few people, Nicaragua, Chile, or Brazil. They, those kinds of people want the [00:30:00] Mexicans where the people over there.

And they were very poor people who came here just to try to make enough to send back to their families. So one of the, the beat that I covered was about half a Latinos, Mexicans, and that was from. At line up to Jefferson street on seventh street and recovered eighth street later on when the nightclubs of expanded to include a street.

And there weren't very many, but most of the black businesses and bars and all that sort of thing were down on seventh street between wood. And maybe I guess, Jefferson, including the other Hispanic community. So I don't know whether there was any thought about the problem that would develop by [00:31:00] having black officers in the police department or not.

I wasn't privy to it. And some of the black officers. Who were there really became a little suspicious of me because I came here directly from the university of California and they themselves. Looked at me. Well, what

were you reporting to the DA's office or something, you know? But anyway, that was the kind of thing that the suspicion that that was, but among us was a result of the fact that we all had been raised in segregated situations. And we recognize it. There were two concerns, what people said and what they.

And then you deal with people who are in authority. You listen to what they say, but you had to figure out what they meant. And in many cases, by the time you figured it out, they had won a game on [00:32:00] you. Oh, they ask

Rick Moss: you about, so you speak, you mentioned being raised in segregated areas and in various parts of the country, I wanted to ask you about your upbringing in in Missouri.

Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Odell H. Sylvester: Well, I had a half brother in Texas, but I left Texas when I was four years old because I was very sick and I had, who've been coughing perhaps and won't even, and my father lived in Kansas city and he had a relationship with a lady who had a child who had died and she was he was my age.

So. As happens in many black families. She corresponded with my grandmother and in black families in the south, many people are aware that the grandmother who is called in most senses big mama. Yeah, that's right. She's called big mama. And she runs it. [00:33:00] And my, my grandmother, cause my mother, I was 16 when I was born and her, her husband, my father was 18.

So. I never, as a matter of fact, when I was growing up before I went to Kansas city, I just called my mother by her first name because everybody else did. And as far as I was concerned, my grandmother big mama ran the show and she definitely did. She made decisions about everything. And I recall vividly that she made a decision.

When I, when I was sick, she too was taking me to the hospital, my first experience riding the bus. So the buses were segregated and they had a sign that would say, call her in one,

say white didn't fall in color in the back. So when I got on the bus, that's the first time she was with me and I wanted to sit there in the front.

So she bought snatched my arm off, taken me the back.
[00:34:00] I said, why can't we sit up here and Bama. So by then she said, boy, shut up. And she took me to the back and when we got back there, she told me. Go to have a question, what I tell you to do. And, and I, she made me realize that later on, I realized she was because the people, the bus driver would have told me to get back there anyway.

And in Texas at that point in time, About 1929 or 30 they would move the sign that said colored and white. They would move it back and you have to sit behind the side when they moved back and forth in the white sections. You move behind the car side. And except when you got to be in the colored neighborhood where, so most of the street cars will go to town.

The end of the street car line, there will be areas where most of the colored people live. I didn't know the word [00:35:00] African-American then in wonder in any way, but we as kids, we're not parents weren't around. We would either move Zan up or we would sit in front of it, but quite right. Yeah. We realized that that was not a wise thing to do if there were white people around.

And the area that I lived in was called the bottom. Let's see, the reason that reason Dr. Jones is here, we're on a collaboration and I've all this stuff probably is. Sounds redundant, Tim. I'm sure because. But he convinced me that it was worth writing about so that some black people youngsters would understand that where they are now didn't come out of the medically, that there were people who had to sacrifice and to were very extended themselves [00:36:00] to really get what they consider just the normal sort of thing.

Do you think that

even the young people today, the young people of Oakland. Any clue as to that perspective and what you're talking

about or what you're telling us? No, as a matter of fact, that's why Dr. Jones and my son I've convinced me that it's. Because I, I didn't want to add this. And I was the first person to have any rank Sergeant, Lieutenant, captain, deputy chief, the first black chief in the Northern California major city.

And that sounds like bragging. Although every job. Competitive examination, including the chief of police in Berkeley. So I never got a job. Yeah. I was appointed to, and that's a difference in back on the east coast jobs in police departments are highly political and they appointed and that sort of thing.

And in San [00:37:00] Francisco, which was a carbon copy of the east coast, their jobs were, were appointed and you had to be Irish American or Catholic on related to somebody to get a job there. So these are the kinds of things that I don't think very many young not only blacks, but Latino Americans understand well, Latino Americans have another problem because in a and M the countries south of the border police guest, grossly corrupt, and they recognize it.

And they mistreat or at least don't have much respect for any kind of policemen. Certainly black policemen. That'll, we're the only ones who worked in their area. They expected you to be the same way the police were, where they grew up and [00:38:00] even being charitable, I'd have to say that to a great extent.

They are still that way in Mexico. Everybody's not grew up, but significant numbers of, of police officials are corrupt and that creates a significant problem, but I'm, I'm concerned. And I endeavored to put some of this information in writing because Dr. Jones or my son, and some other people that I know said that there's still a void.

You're not, I really feel there's a void, but. I'm so removed from it. Now that I wonder what has to happen. I've long identified that there are a lot of social problem that relate to being unsuccessful. Your horizons get lowered. You recognize it's nobody in that job that the likelihood that you will be able to achieve it is not very good.[00:39:00]

And consequently. You know, you strike out to get some kind of a job that is all with someone is already a made it in modes and you think, well, I can do that because I know that person and down south, the reality was that those people that even though they were successful, they lived in the same neighborhood.

So integration as it happens here in Califia. As is a two-edged sword. It is unfortunate in some instances, because if you are successful in anything, you don't want to live in the lowest economics social strata, because you worked hard to get out of there, but the people who live there frequently don't have exposure to you, or if they do it's at arms length and they don't recognize.

It wasn't always that [00:40:00] way. And they don't recognize that there are some sacrifices they have to make still to be, be achievers because in spite of the so-called advances, they're still not only subtle, but. Things that happened to make you realize that you're not going to be successful unless you're an overachiever.

And that's what it seems to me. It bothers me that so many people don't have in there or not willing to put forward to kind of effort.

Rick Moss: Yeah, I was going to, and I'm glad you brought that up because I was thinking well, in an era that we live in, where a lot of the battles had already been. By by people like you and others, and the road is paved

Odell H. Sylvester: that,

Rick Moss: that now the proportion of underachievers far exceeds those of any overachievement that may be.

And yet we live [00:41:00] in a place in a time where there are more opportunities, but we take less advantage of those opportunities. And that seems to be quite

Odell H. Sylvester: the dilemma. Well, my identification. Times have changed as extended. There are easier ways. Like when I grew up in Kansas city, I wanted to be musician or bar fighter.

I didn't do very well as a fighter. And I was a musician only because I could borrow the school's horn, which is an Alto saxophone. But the reality of it is here. It's easier to become, to do something illegal and make him have immediate gratification than it is to go to school. Now, people do that. And my concern with the tribute newspaper for that matter is that they talk more about the people who are drug dealers, who are pimps, who discouraged young women from achieving, who put them in [00:42:00] situations where it's easier for them.

To become prostitutes and it is for them to go to college. That kind of a situation is what influences the fact or impacts upon the fact that we have, yeah, significant numbers of young males who go to prison. They go before they learn very much about what they can do and the opportunities that arise as a soldier.

That they deal with what appears to be an opportunity to be successful. And many of them are doing life on installment plans. If you can come out and in two months you can buy yourself up Cadillac. And the best thing you can do is you want to work is work at McDonald's or someplace that's a entry level job.

Well, nobody seems willing to do that now. And the parents. Oh [00:43:00] nuts. I guess maybe rigid is rigid enough to say yes, got to do it this way because the parents in many instances have not been significantly successful themselves. And although are the middle-class is changing, the lower middle-class is changing all the time.

It took them so long to get there. And young people will succumb to immediate gratification. And that's unfortunate because California is worse than the safety would think would be better because California has more people in jail except in

Texas where I was born. Yes. That's a hell of a statement to me.

Yeah. But the truth of it is you go to, you go to jail for such minor things. At some point in time. And when I became the chief in Berkeley, They had passed a city ordinance, which is totally illegal saying that, you [00:44:00] know, you can't arrest people for marijuana. Well, you have to because the city is not the ultimate authority, as far as what law enforcement people do, the state and the federal gun supersede what's that is that the city.

So they resorted to trying to Cut your budget or making you make a necessary reports when people are arrested for marijuana, something like that. But the reality and O'Quinn, and I was coming to this point is that there's so much publicity about it. And it appears that so much young Pete, so many young people use this as a method to get ahead, and then they get so violent.

Because it's an easy thing to do. And once you get involved in it, you don't have ambition. Very few people. If they're selling drugs are going to come back. [00:45:00] When they come out of prison and I'm sent back, Oakland are going to enroll in universities. They just, it's going to be very difficult to do so

Rick Moss: something's missing there.

That was, that was there before. That, that block, that kind of activity. Now there seems to be a vacuum that's not filled in, into it. Either rushes this kind of under or subculture do what, do you know what that is? What's missing?

Odell H. Sylvester: Well, I haven't, I have an idea that I w I, I really think it's the. Use of drugs.

I think the use of drugs is primarily the reason because that's the quickest way that individuals can get what they call a measure of success. But they're at the bottom of the ladder. People who make BU really benefit from drugs. Drugs are people who live in [00:46:00] Columbia or Nicaragua, or

they're the people that are very, very high on the ladder and already make it.

And they were insulated against the justice, which is really unfortunate because what happens, this is the guy at the bottom. Doesn't really get us. Before he goes to jail. As a matter of fact, I've always taken exception to the differences in penalties for use of cocaine, and they use the marijuana.

They're not born in the same rich people, a lot of rich people, knowingly and openly use cocaine. And when they are arrested for the justice system, doesn't put them in jail. It gives them an alternative opportunity to get away from it and they do have money. And so they have, they have an opportunity also to rehab themselves not easily, but they have a chance to do it.

But for marijuana, [00:47:00] there was just very, very difficult and the harsh system that deals with the use of marijuana. In my judgment. I think that it may, eventually marijuana is going to be made legal. It just doesn't make sense for the research, but

Rick Moss: isn't the use of drugs, period. Whatever the reason people use them, I know would vary, but generally it's to numb themselves or to make them feel good about something that their situation and otherwise that they would not be feeling good is just symptomatic of another problem.

Odell H. Sylvester: Oh, there are a lot of other issues under employment and lack of recreation, a lot of social issues. But the reality though is that marijuana is too easily accessible and the marijuana want to in and of itself is not [00:48:00] bad, but it's generally the first. Todd really getting involved now, heroin is more addictive than marijuana, but heroin was mostly used in Asia and other places.

And now heroin is so difficult to use that it's not the drug of choice for poor folks. And I hate to use that word poor because it's a circumstance. That generally is not by choice. You're not poor because you want to be poor. You're poor because of the circumstances of an accident of birth, the circumstances that you find yourself in the parenting that goes into your growth,

the little things that, and the people at the top of the ladder even more so now.

Yeah. Are you recording this? Because [00:49:00] I'm trying to think of a nice word for I'm really pissed off.

Okay. Because, because the people who are making the money know what is happening, but there's, they're working toward it's that there's maybe eventually they will be eliminating the middle class. Like what happened in France? If you have a lower class and an upper class and no middle class, you got a real problem because there's nothing for the poor people to aspire to before they get rich, unless they can get wished right away.

And that's what cause of civil war that's already

Rick Moss: happening in many African-American communities

Odell H. Sylvester: throughout the nation

Rick Moss: disappearance of, or the movie. Of middle-class elements that, like you mentioned, do you see a solution to that or a remedy to that instead of being pawns in this game, what can societies [00:50:00] and people who find themselves in that situation consciously

Odell H. Sylvester: do to avoid it?

Well, I see, I see there, there is an advantage queued dis people that are discriminated against. There's an advantage by being At the lower end lower level. The reality of it is, is it's going to happen to Latinos and Asians. And they've always tried to take some steps themselves, but between Latinos.

And African-American the fact that the only people who succeed are generally going to be the people who are overqualified and they're the ones. Who make money having a job and being able to produce something that the marketplace can use means that you will make money. Eventually it's a long process, but the blacks and Latinos and Asians who succeed

are going to be buttoned soul over the white, who don't bother to [00:51:00] do it.

And it's going to be the system that creates. If you look right now, of course, if you read the jet, all the Ebony magazines, you'll find people who are successful. They are overachievers. The system does respect over achievers because we are competitive capitalistic system. And whoever's got money that sees that you can enhance their, their ability to make.

They don't really care about who you are, what you are. It's just that it takes so long to get there. But eventually our society, the American will be we'll look like people in India or Iraq, they all be bound colored because nobody cares. They just care about who can make money and who can produce something that somebody wants.

And capitalism is. We have more of a [00:52:00] capitalistic society than we do a democratic society. And I think people don't need, they don't recognize that as much as they should. So we're going to get there. It's just that I won't see it in my lifetime. I'm over my grandson wheel, but that may be not achievable too, because we may be several generations away, but it, when it does.

It levels itself out. We are greedy capitalistic country and people who have money make more money and people make more money, want to solidify their opportunity to make it. And prejudice goes away. Being printed. This goes away because they'll hire, they may hire a few servants, but if you got the kind of talent and education and background that can [00:53:00] help them make a few million dollars more in their business, they're going to be concerned about you.

And they got to somehow figure out that you differ from those people who look like you, but who. In the math that the jokes you hear about, it was a guy that's of course a coach here in Alabama. He wanted to get some black football players and they wouldn't let him, so he got some guys that they were light skinned and called him Cubans.

And then it was a guy, it was a guy, everybody knew his name.

Yes, sir. He said, look at that Cuban run. And the reason why I killed him, I say, hello. And he was an African-American, but to see that that problem doesn't exist anymore, but the greatest sin, because it didn't exist as far as quarterbacks were concerned, but that doesn't exist anymore because people. [00:54:00] Who make money who live well, want to continue living well.

And discrimination is one of the lesser problems as far as they're concerned, because they don't have to worry about it. So now what happens is they import immigrants and a lot of people that come from other countries have been treated very, very shabbily, particularly when you have a language problem.

And that's the kind of situation that is going to. Have probably we're going to have problem in the states for a long time. That's why trying to correct it. But overall slamming the gate is not going to work because I've seen, even in his experience as a police officer in Southern California and in Texas, Arizona, places like that, they allow agricultural workers to come.

And they lived very poorly, but they, the [00:55:00] murder workers see it as an opportunity to better their friends. They lived in caves. They do like this company store years ago for African-Americans where you owe more money at the end of the growing season than you made. Then the reality of it is that some of the agribusiness people, and I've seen this via my own eyes, they let the immigration people know.

The season is over two weeks from now. You can come and arrest all these people. I had working all summer and they don't pay him. So I don't want to be bellyaching about, but this has been my experience eight years. I've seen a lot of stuff and I've seen people succeed, but I have, I can identify without reservation in my judgment, the way the society works, I believe in.

So.

Rick Moss: Absolutely absolutely true. But I wanted to ask you about, you know, we talked a lot about you [00:56:00] know, the dynamics of various communities and in success,

overachievers, things that are there, things that are missing in various communities, African American, community, Latino, et cetera. How would you define community, Mr.

Sylvis?

Odell H. Sylvester: Well, I define community as being. A group of interrelated people who are concerned about each other's welfare and who over the benefit of doing something that provides them a singular opportunity would choose to be a part of the community and to allow other people that don't have the same opportunity there to succeed.

And that's a general kind of a definition, but I think that's about as specific as I can get.

Rick Moss: You think we still have a real [00:57:00] African-American community in Oakland?

Odell H. Sylvester: Yes and no. We have, we have a community defined by the news media, the find by the television stations and we don't have enough of a community defined.

The members of it, the people are successful because years ago, and I guess perhaps I'm repeating myself years ago, the ambition for successful people will support other people up with them. And Jenny, you have relatives or some people that you knew you lived around them and so forth. But it's one of the things that, and I guess not to generalize is just remember that I talked about how in Kansas C.

Everybody lived in the same period as a segregated community, but all the doctors and lawyers, we all live there and I could see them and went to school with their kids. And although I wasn't a child [00:58:00] loving professional people, I saw the way they lived. And I said, I'm not going to be always like I am now.

I'm going to be like those guys. See, and that's what needs to happen. And that's why it's going to be slow, but it will happen

because the smart people, the people are going to take it advantage. And then even now you can see families were seven, eight children, four of them will go to college and three of them will be drug dealers.

And I know some people like that and those people who went to college didn't have any more of an opportunity. They just decided that they didn't want to do that. What their brothers and sisters were doing. And in many instances, they were overachievers. They got to be achievers and that's the way it's going to work here.

It just ain't going to work like tomorrow..

Rick Moss: Have you had any, and

Unknown: I'm going to interrupt [00:59:00] get a new tape here after I get ten seconds of black out.

Odell H. Sylvester: I've talked too long.

Unknown: No no no.

Rick Moss: You let me know when you need to go,

Odell H. Sylvester: Hey, I can talk forever.